

Situational Context

Julie, a thirty-seven year old white woman, is a well-educated and experienced high school educator who recently returned to teaching after a hiatus of several years. Unable to locate employment in local school districts, Julie has signed on with Covenant University as a part-time introductory composition teacher. The student body of Covenant primarily consists of working adults returning to complete undergraduate degrees. Julie is accustomed to satisfied students. Julie took this assignment on short notice expecting to apply many of the same teaching methods from high school. Within the first month of the course, Julie began noticing things were not going as expected. Increasingly students struggled to get assignments completed, and some began to miss class meetings. Student engagement decreased as the course continued threatening student's success in this course, and impairing writing ability needed for subsequent studies.

Contributing Factors

All the students are working adults, with ages ranging from twenty-five to 51. In contrast to her past experience teaching high school, where Julie was by age alone a clear authority figure, Julie and her students are all middle aged adults existing in a similar age-based peer group. Baxter Magolda (1992) describes social cognitive development as a continuum that people progress through as they mature. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) summarize this continuum by describing that students moved from "being certain about what they knew, to uncertainty, and finally to being able to integrate information from diverse points of view." Julie's students do not expect to gain all their knowledge from authority figures, anticipating instead learning from their peers and through reflection on their own experiences.

Each of the students is building on previous work towards degrees or hoping to earn college-credit for their previous experience. Julie perceives students to be going off-topic by bringing up work-related and personal experiences related to course content. Fiddler and Marienau (1995, p. 76) explain the need for relational development where learning depends on “interactions among one’s experiences and ideas, and those of others.” Establishing connections between content and their personal goals or work-related challenges assists and motivates learners. “Since intellectual and cognitive growth in adults is largely based on life experiences”, Tennant and Pogson (1995) claim that the ability to make use of student’s life experience for learning should be a central concern of adult educators. By shutting down attempts by learners to establish relationships that bring their individual interests and experience into the learning experiences Julie actually inhibits their ability to learn. Scholars have established a strong base for the importance of interrelations and the interpersonal connectedness of the learner during the learning process (Caffarella, 1996; Fiddler and Marienau, 1995; Taylor and Marienau, 1995). Vella (2001) explains how students will withdraw from a course in which they don’t feel connected and offers suggestions for practice that provide a safe, energizing environment that include strong learner to learner and learner to educator relationships. By denying students affective response to the material and failing to reciprocate their attempts at relationship building, Julie directly contributes to the lack of engagement that threatens her student’s success.

Julie’s practices employ some active learning strategies, but she remains in control of the content and the direction of learning experiences throughout all the class meetings. Such transmission oriented practices have been described as dominant in western liberal education by Bounous (2001, p.198). Julie seems to rely heavily on forms of practice that center on the instructor as the controller, holder, and creator of knowledge to which they impart to a passive

learner whom absorbs the knowledge. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) suggest practitioners instead facilitate the learning experience by leveraging an adult's ability to self-direct and the student's desire to plan their own learning. Likely Julie's strategies are not developmentally conscious, and fail to meet the needs of the students.

Furthermore, students also experience qualitative changes to their cognitive abilities as they progress through adulthood and gain life experience. Pogson and Tennant (1995) describe adulthood as "a period of ongoing intellectual and cognitive growth, qualitatively different than childhood". Adult capacity for learning changes with age, a phenomenon explained by Dixon and Baltes (1986) as a gradual shift from a reliance on the "mechanics of intelligence" to that of the "pragmatics of intelligence". The mechanics of intelligence focus on the ability to handle new experiences with basic cognition. Pragmatic intelligence describes the reliance on applying or expanding specialized knowledge or contextual cognitive skills. Julie remains accustomed to teaching students that lack a well-developed cognitive development, relying on exercise and curriculum designed for younger students.

Formulating Solutions

Andragogy as originally established by Knowles (1970) models adult learning in contrast to traditional attributes of childhood learning. Knowles (1980, p. 43) evolving theory of andragogy is based on five assumptions: maturity leads to self-direction; adults possess a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning; readiness to learn is related to developmental tasks of social role; adults expect an immediacy of application for new knowledge; adults are motivated by internal factors. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005, p. 72) explain that in a revised view of pedagogy and andragogy as a continuum, while the andragogical model applies to all ages by incorporating pedagogical principles, the pedagogical

model excludes the andragogical assumptions. Julie has preferred teaching strategies based on a pedagogical model, which is to say they are styled exclusively to teach immature intellects in a teacher-driven process.

This mismatch between the adult student's strengths, abilities, and preferences favoring an andragogical approach and Julie's favored pedagogical instructional strategies contributes to the lack of academic achievement. Attempting to shift practice towards andragogical models may invigorate the students. Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p. 37), however, "believe the andragogical model of instruction has not been used a great deal in actual practice, except in non-formal and self-directed situations. Adult learning in formal settings... remains primarily instructor designed and directed." Still, Julie must find ways to establish a methodology for her practice grounded in the context of adult education rather than relying on her previous mental model established while teaching high school. The potential shift in mindset gained from exposure to a few recommendations for practice grounded in knowledge of adults and adult learning may result in immediate benefits.

Julie may wish to review the suggestions of Pratt (1988) who is cited by Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p. 37) as providing the "most comprehensive" framework for merging the "two extremes of instructor-directed and learner-directed designs." Pratt (1988) establishes a model that helps instructors choose a role based on the level of direction and support needed by the learner. Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p. 38) cite Pratt's (1988, p. 167) quadrants: (1) learners need both direction and support (teacher directed); (2) learners need direction (teacher directed); (3) learners need support but are reasonably self-directed (learner directed); (4) learners are at least moderately capable of providing their own direction and support (learner directed). To gain a better understanding of where learners in her class reside in this model, Julie must begin to

establish relationships with the students and understand more about them as individuals. It is important to build an understanding of what students want to get out of the learning experience and the competencies they bring to the learning environment from experience. Building such an understanding and relationship with the students will allow Julie to vary her approach and apply the content of the course differently to small groups of students with similar needs in the course.

In future teaching engagements with adults, Julie should plan some up-front work getting in contact with students. Imel (1994) suggests, “information about the amount and type of direction learners require can be obtained through a needs assessment”. To gain this understanding of her students and establish a more intimate relationship with her students, Julie should review the concepts and suggestions for practice described by Vella (2001, p. 57-70). Although there is unlikely to be enough time to make radical changes in the course curriculum this semester, a mid-course needs assessment might reinvigorate the students and provide an opportunity for Julie to shift momentum back in a positive direction. By taking input from students and beginning to establish connections to their prior experience and their aspirations, Julie will begin to move her practice towards techniques more appropriate to adult learners.

Getting Started - Julie as an Adult Learner

Being cognizant of both sound principles for adult education and the time limitation facing Julie while currently teaching this course, the faculty committee advising her should probably take a gradual approach to introducing Julie to all the material suggested in this paper. A good place to start would be to pair Julie with an experienced teacher that will act as her mentor. If Covenant has a mentor comfortable with the dialogue educational style described by Vella (2001, p. 85-100) such a person would be ideal for establishing a sound relationship to aid Julie. The mentor could help Julie design her first mid-course needs assessment and aid in her

interpretation of the results. To provide background, offer Julie a list of reading from which she can choose an article that seems most helpful based on her experience. Such a beginning to Julie's process of expanding her knowledge of adult learning remains consistent with the ideas of Knowles (1980) and Pratt (1988) discussed previously, which should allow Julie the self-direction, social environment, immediacy, and grounding in prior knowledge that will allow her to grow as an adult educator. Transitions like Julie's have been described by Bridges (1980, p. 5) as "the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of growth". Recognizing the symptoms of a problem early and seeking help, Julie has activated a teachable moment in her transition from child-educator to adult-educator.

References

- Baxter Magolda, M. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bridges, W. (1980). *Transitions*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Bounous, R. (2001). "Teaching as political practice." In Sheared, V. & Sissel, P. A. (eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001.
- Caffarella, R. S. (1996). "What women have taught us about teaching adults." *Journal of staff development*, 17(4), 40-45
- Dixon, R. A., and Baltes, P. B. (1986). "Toward Lifespan Research on the Functions and Pragmatics of Intellegence." In R. J. Sternberg and R. K. Wagner (eds.), *Practical intelligence: Nature and origins of competence*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiddler, M., and Marienau, C. (1995). "Linking learning, teaching, and development." In Taylor, K. and Marienau, C. (eds.), *Learning environments for women's adult development: Bridges toward change*. New directions for adult and continuing education, no. 65. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Imel, S. (2001). *Guidelines for working with adult learners*. Eric Digest No. 154
<http://www.ericdigests.org/1995-2/working.htm>
- Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*. New York: Cambridge Books.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. (2nd ed.) New York: Cambridge Books.

- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner : The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6th ed.). Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
- Merriam, S. B. and Caffarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in Adulthood* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pratt, D. D. (1988). "Andragogy as a relational construct." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 38, 3, 160-172.
- Taylor, K. and Marienau, C. (eds.). (1995). *Learning Environments for Women's Adult Development: Bridges Toward Change*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 65. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tennant, M. and Pogson, P. (1995). *Learning and Change in the Adult Years*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vella, J. (2001). *Learning to Listen Learning to Teach : The power of dialogue in educating adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.